

Getting Old

Kwan Haeng Sunim

I've been practicing at Providence Zen Center since November 2012. I ordained at Chik Chi Sa Temple in Korea in April 1999 at the age of forty-one. So these days I have attained the aging process as an experience, as opposed to just an idea of getting old. Bowing was always a very grounding practice for me, and while I bowed it would occur to me that I'm not always going to be able to do all 108 bows during morning practice. Well, that time has arrived. I no longer have that tool in my dharma toolkit, at least for the time being. Bowing the full prostrations has always been a help to me in my life. It was a simple way for me to attain the moment and let go of anger and desire mind. Also I have had some very pleasant insightful moments while bowing.

In 1987, after sitting a three-month retreat at Shin Won Sa Temple, I became a haeng-ja, the step one takes before ordaining, which requires one to work in the temple at various tasks for at least a year before ordaining as a novice monk. I always did extra bows all my practicing life, and when I became a haeng-ja, I gladly joined the monthly event called *sam cheon bae* or three thousand bows. From 9:00 p.m. to 3:00 a.m. we would bow. We bowed for fifty minutes at a time, with ten-minute breaks in between. Then at 11 p.m. we would take a forty-minute break before continuing. I enjoyed this practice so much that I would do it during the ninety-day Kyol Che retreats at Hwa Gye Sa Temple without missing any retreat practice.

While I lived at Hwa Gye Sa, I taught English once a week. With the English classes and the Sunday dharma practice of meditation instruction, two rounds of meditation followed by a dharma talk, I had quite a bit of contact with the sangha. On occasion people would ask me for advice—sometimes about life-changing questions. Should I quit my job? Or should I go to school full time? Or should I get married? After finishing school, should I go traveling before starting my career? Instead of advising them on what decision to make, I would suggest they try the *sam cheon bae*. Often the reason for such indecision is a lot of thinking. Trying to weigh the pros and cons doesn't always work with a question that doesn't have a right or wrong answer, but which has an answer that works for the person asking the question. The thing you have to do is stop thinking about the problem and let your don't-know mind give you an answer. This is the mind before thinking. Another way of saying that is let your intuition give you an answer. Your intuitive mind, don't-know mind, and before-thinking mind are all the same mind.

During the *sam cheon bae* we would bow at a good

pace, often shouting *Amita Bul*, and that left us huffing and puffing and soaked with sweat. At some point you let go of your thinking and just try to do the next bow and then the bow after that, and the one after that. Your don't-know mind appears as only-doing-it mind. Afterward, what would often happen after a day, a few days, or a week later while going about your business, an answer to your question appears. That is your answer—not the Buddha's answer, not your parents' answer, but your answer. That is your don't-know mind in operation. I had fond moments just as the bowing session ended to be just standing there exhausted, breathing hard and not thinking. This puts you right in the moment.

So then you may think what does 108 bows in the morning do? Why do that? Often in the morning we wake up in not so good a mood. Maybe some monsters chased you in your sleep, or you got in an argument with someone. Personally, my dreams used to be nightmarish. And this angst would follow me into work. After a few interactions with my workmates they would understand that I got up on the wrong side of the bed that morning. But if you get up and do 108 bows in the morning you can let go of this angst and become clear. To do this, though, you have to get into the habit of bowing. To see our minds and deal with our habits or karma that cause us and others suffering, we have to make practice a habit. That is not to say that thinking is bad, but as a friend once told me, "Your thinking mind is a good servant but a bad master." Naturally we have other practices such as sitting meditation, chanting, kong-an interviews, together action, and *soen yu* breathing exercises.

But I'll always have a special place in my heart for bowing. ♦

Kwan Haeng Sunim met Zen Master Seung Sahn in 1986 at the Cambridge Zen Center. In 1997 he went to Korea to train at Hwa Gye Sa Temple in Seoul. He received novice monk's precepts in 1999, and in 2003 he received full bhikkhu (monk) precepts and lived and practiced in Korea until 2012.

In 2012 Kwan Haeng Sunim returned to the United States and the Providence Zen Center, where he continues to serve as the head dharma teacher and hosts the Sunday dharma practice program. He also serves as head dharma teacher for each ninety-day winter Kyol Che retreat. In addition, he records and edits dharma talks, and he maintains the Zen center's social media presence by posting ads, memes, and videos every week on FaceBook and Instagram.